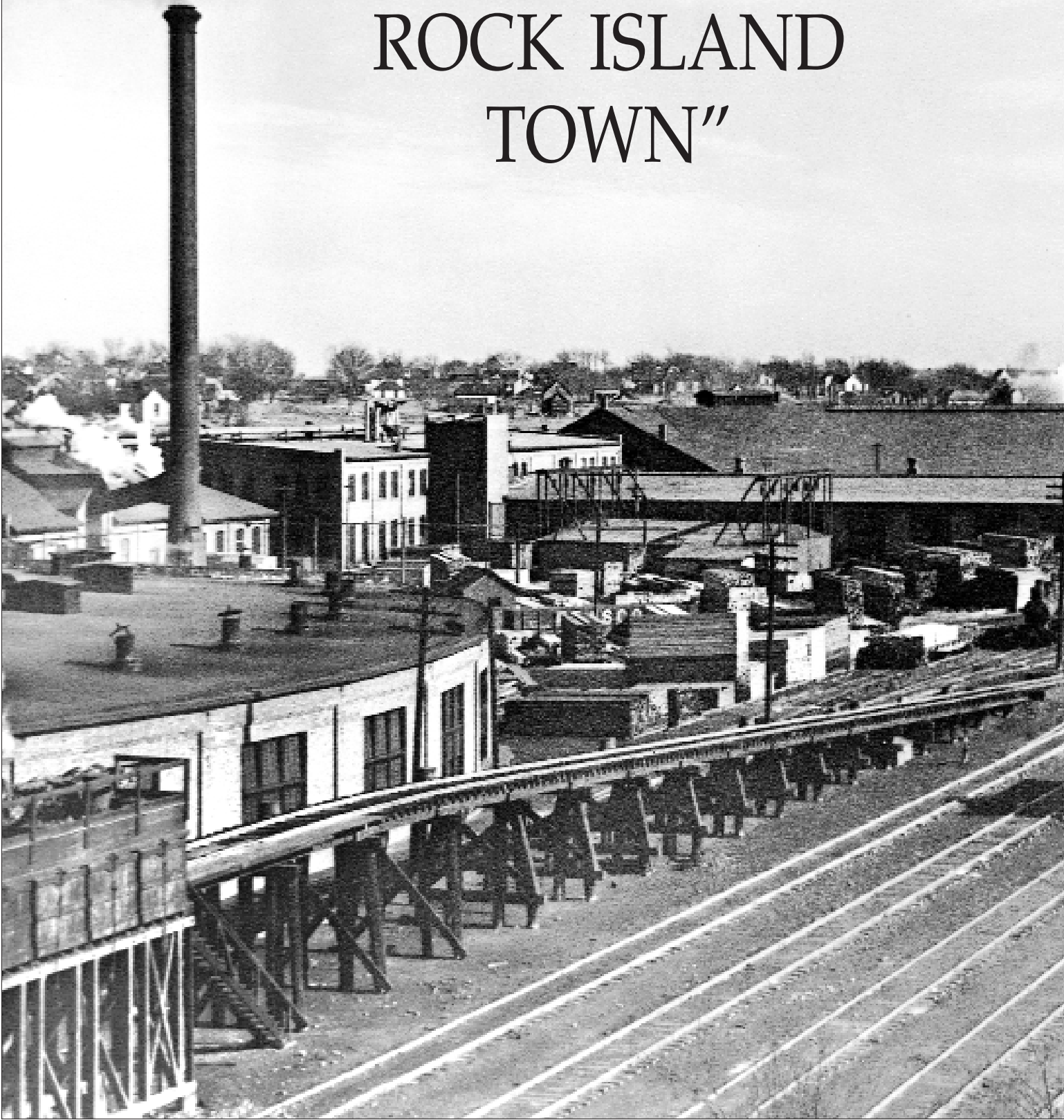


“EMPHATICALLY A ROCK ISLAND TOWN”



Horton's Rock Island railroad shops complex, 1910.



The Railroad Legacy of Horton, Kansas, 1887–1946

by I. E. Quastler

Horton was a classic American railroad town. Founded in 1886 by men associated with the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railway (familiarily known as the Rock Island), for half a century its economy depended overwhelmingly on that railroad. When railroad jobs began to disappear in the 1930s, the town was shaken, economically and socially, to its foundations. Horton survived that economic disaster, but at great cost, and it is a touchy subject to some residents to this day.

Horton is an example of a widespread phenomenon: the economic decline of railroad towns. As railroad productivity increased sharply, especially after World War II, and as railroads lost traffic to other modes, many such towns suffered. Some Kansas examples include smaller places such as Parsons, Herington, and Newton, but even larger cities, Topeka and Kansas City, Kansas, for example, felt the harsh impacts of these changes. Horton's case was especially extreme, for the railroad represented almost its entire economic base.

Originating in Chicago in the 1850s, by the 1870s the Rock Island had reached the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, Iowa; Kansas City, Missouri; and Atchison and Leavenworth, Kansas. For many years it refrained from expanding west of that river because, at the time, the Missouri was recognized as the dividing line between (in regional terminology) the "eastern" and "western" railroads. For a railroad from one side of the river to build beyond the opposite shore was "territorial invasion," a serious breach of accepted business practices that invited severe retaliation. Instead, the Rock Island interchanged

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A CK&N engine brings a trainload of potential buyers of town lots into Horton past the unfinished station, September 20, 1887.

"The Magic City," the latter denoting its rise from a corn field as if by magic. Repeatedly they stressed several alleged advantages that would ensure Horton's rapid growth in population and real estate values. These included its location at the point where three operating divisions would meet, producing hundreds of jobs for trainmen, dispatchers, depot agents, and track workers. More important, here was the announced location of the main CK&N shops, generating even more jobs.⁶

In November 1886 the *Headlight* reported track layers approaching town. By November 10 citizens could hear the whistle of the engines, and two days later the tracks reached Horton. Hundreds of onlookers gave a "glad huzza" as the last spike was driven, "thus settling forever the future destiny and assured greatness of Horton." Soon, the editors projected wildly, Horton would have fifteen hundred railroad jobs, supporting six thousand people. Such growth would attract other businesses, such as grain elevators, wholesalers, and retailers, leading to ten thousand people within three years and fifteen thousand in five. At the time of these predictions Horton had 325 inhabitants.⁷

Virtually from the day the Horton news was announced, other towns tried to divert the shops from this Kansas community. These included Fairbury and Beatrice, Nebraska; and Atchison, Leavenworth, and Topeka, Kansas. As established places, they could

6. *History of Horton and Surrounding Neighborhoods* (Horton, Kans: N.p., 1974), 17; *Horton Headlight*, October 29, 1886, November 18, 1887. At the extreme, the boosters claimed that Horton eventually would be Kansas's metropolis. Horton was the junction for three divisions only for a short period around 1900.

7. *Horton Headlight*, November 12, 19, 26, 1886. At its peak, Horton had about one thousand railroad jobs. See Charles H. Browne, "List of

offer subsidies, something Horton could not match. All these efforts failed, for the relevant CK&N decision makers stood to profit enormously from Horton land sales.⁸

Construction of the shops began in March 1887. The largest buildings included a locomotive shop, 112 x 200 feet; a three-story sawmill, 100 x 200 feet; as well as coach, freight car, and blacksmith shops, each 100 x 200 feet. This was indeed an impressive complex, especially in rural northeast Kansas. Simultaneously, a CK&N official announced plans for a twenty-eight-stall roundhouse. The *Headlight* quoted him to say (incorrectly) that it would be the largest such building west of the Missouri River.⁹

In July the same newspaper reprinted an article about Horton from Chicago's *Times*. It sounded so much like other *Headlight* articles that it was probably written by a Horton editor who paid the *Times* to publish it. In just nine months, it said, a cornfield had become a thriving place of twenty-five hundred people (actual population: eleven hundred). First putting a number on such projections, it said eventually the shops would employ twenty-four hundred men and would be the largest such facility west of Chicago. Had the Horton shops ever employed twenty-four hundred, they would indeed have been one of the na-

Rock Island Officials," Railroad Situation—Horton, 1939, Correspondence Received, folder 1, box 12, Payne H. Ratner Administration, Records of the Governor's Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, hereafter cited as Governor's Records. Browne claimed that, at the company's employment peak just before World War I, eight hundred men worked in the shops: the estimate of one thousand total railroaders is based on that number, plus about seventy employed in the storehouse and 130 others in the Horton depot, yards, and in local track maintenance.

8. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, July 11, 1930; *Horton Headlight*, October 29, November 26, 1886, September 22, 1892. Initially, CK&N was headquartered in Atchison, but in March 1887 stockholders voted to move the corporation to Topeka so officials could be close to Kansas's political powers. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 117; Corporation Charters, 28: 357–59.

9. *Horton Headlight*, March 25, April 8, July 22, August 5, September 16, 1887. The August 5 article was reprinted from the *St. Joseph Herald*, July 29, 1887.

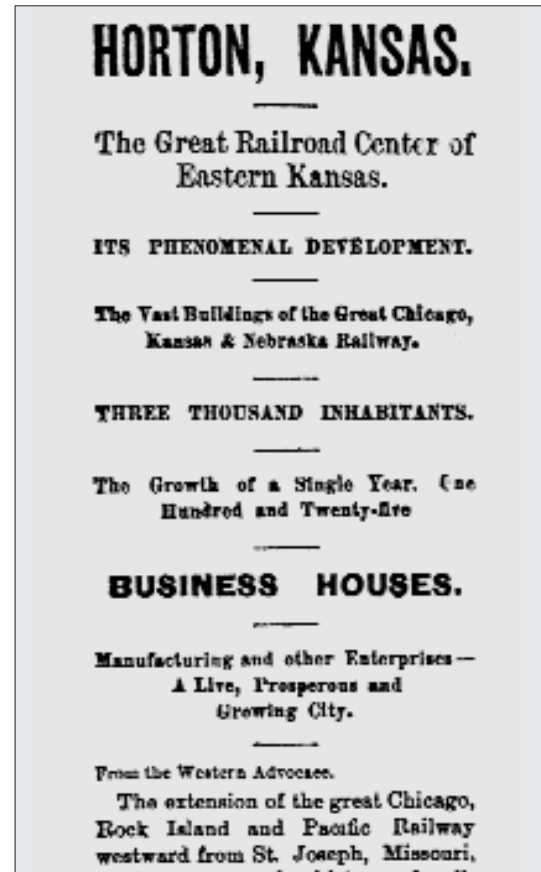
As the location of the CK&N Railroad shops, Horton believed it would become a thriving railroad facility. Such confidence is evident in this newspaper article in the Horton Headlight, October 14, 1887, reprinted from the Western Advocate.

tion's largest. In fact, employment there never exceeded approximately eight hundred.¹⁰

Late in 1887 workers finished the buildings, and machinery began to arrive. Simultaneously, more realistic figures about the likely number of employees appeared in the press. In December the *Headlight* said that three hundred men would soon work in the locomotive shop. When the other buildings were ready for use, five to six hundred other jobs would be created. Within six months, the editors claimed, one thousand men would work there.¹¹

In 1888, as shop employment and CK&N traffic expanded, Horton grew rapidly. A census on March 1, 1888, recorded 3,191 residents. Although that was much lower than current newspaper claims, it was about two thousand more than one year earlier. The shop's first order was to build one hundred boxcars, but its main task soon became repairs to CK&N rolling stock, particularly locomotives, freight cars, and passenger equipment. That June the *Headlight* reported (probably exaggerating slightly) that the CK&N employed five hundred shop workers and the city was home to about six hundred railroaders with a monthly payroll of thirty-five thousand dollars.¹²

Horton also tried to attract other industries to diversify its economy. In January 1888 the *Headlight* announced that the town had just raised sixty-five thousand dollars to obtain the newly chartered Horton Implement Company, the "largest [such] factory in the west," which would employ five hundred. This firm was sure to increase Horton's population by twenty-five hundred and help attract competing railroads. Allegedly, many other manufacturers had their eyes on the city, including a barbed wire plant and a watch factory. The editor thought that, by year's end, the town would have at least eight thousand residents. None of these factories, or any others of substantial size, ever came to



Horton, no competing railroads appeared, and the town's population never exceeded forty-five hundred.¹³

The CK&N network was expanding rapidly. In February 1888 the route southwest was finished to Liberal in southwest Kansas, and on July 15 the line south from Herington reached Pond Creek, Indian Territory. Progress was fastest on the Colorado line, for on November 5 the first train operated from Horton to Colorado Springs, at the base of the Rockies. Like all CK&N routes, it was completed to high standards, with gentle grades and curves. By the end of 1888 the railroad had built 1,113 miles in just over two years.¹⁴

Other developments were not so favorable to Horton. In September 1887 the CK&N began to use Union Pacific trackage rights between Kansas City and Topeka. In conjunction with its existing Chicago–Kansas City route, this offered a new road southwest from Chicago that bypassed Horton (Map 1). Thereafter the Rock Island system offered four daily passenger trains from Chicago to the southwest,

10. Browne, "List of Rock Island Officials"; *Horton Commercial*, June 2, 1888; *Horton Headlight*, July 1, 1887; Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Sixth Biennial Report, 1887–1888* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1889), 40.

11. *Horton Headlight*, October 21, November 18, December 2, 9, 1887, August 3, 1888.

12. *Horton Commercial*, February 28, 1889; *Horton Headlight*, February 24, March 2, 9, June 2, August 3, 1888; Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Sixth Biennial Report*, 40.

13. Browne, "List of Rock Island Officials"; *Horton Headlight*, January 2, 27, February 10, 1888.

14. Grodinsky, *Transcontinental Railway Strategy*, 281–86; Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 119–20; *Horton Headlight*, November 16, 1888. Denver also was served, initially via a circuitous route using trackage rights from Colorado Springs. Later the company achieved a more direct route into Denver via Union Pacific trackage rights from Limon, Colorado.

two via Horton and two via Kansas City. The CK&N also built a line from near Topeka to Belleville, Kansas, that produced a Chicago–Kansas City–Colorado route that bypassed Horton. After completion, the company began to operate two “through vestibule [passenger] trains” from Chicago to Colorado, one via Horton and the other via Kansas City. Probably because they feared their real estate implications, Horton editors said little about these changes.¹⁵

Similar developments were taking place in Nebraska. For some time the Rock Island had considered establishing a more direct Chicago–Colorado route by extending west from Council Bluffs, Iowa. In 1890 it obtained the rights to use the Union Pacific’s Missouri River Bridge into Omaha. From there it built a new line to Lincoln and obtained Union Pacific trackage rights beyond to Beatrice, connecting there with the existing Horton–Colorado line (Map 1). In August 1891 the Rock Island began to offer Chicago–Colorado service via this shortcut. Timetables for June 1893 show two daily Chicago–Denver trains via Omaha; the faster of these saved more than six hours versus any service via Horton or Kansas City. During the next decade, all Chicago–Colorado passenger and freight trains were shifted to the new route through Nebraska. Thereafter the former main route to Colorado northwestward from Horton became a light-traffic branch line.¹⁶

Although the CK&N built much mileage in a short time, it was unprofitable. In June 1890 the courts ordered the firm sold to settle claims, and the following April it was purchased by the Rock Island. Thereafter the former CK&N was listed as the Rock Island’s “Lines West of the Missouri River.”¹⁷

As the shops settled into a routine after 1888, it became clear that Horton’s real estate boom, whatever its actual magnitude, had passed. Within a year in 1889–1890, both owners sold their interests in the *Horton Headlight* and moved on. These changes help to account for its more conservative, and one is tempted to say

more reasonable, subsequent tone. In the following years the *Headlight* consistently paid more attention to railroad matters than did its younger rival, the *Horton Commercial*.¹⁸

In January 1890 the *Commercial* reported that the shops had just produced their first locomotive, a passenger engine. The editor said the locomotive was “new throughout, from the smallest bolt to the boiler head and drivers, and every part was prepared and fitted from the raw castings in the Horton shops.” Horton’s ability to build engines, he suggested, spoke well for “the completeness of the machinery in these gigantic railroad shops, [and] commends the skill of the workmen employed therein.” Although the *Headlight* later claimed that many steam engines were built there, it appears that the actual number was modest, perhaps fewer than ten. There is no evidence that steam engines were built in Horton after 1900.¹⁹

In 1891 the *Headlight* carried an article on the town’s “Mammoth Railroad Shops.” At the time five hundred men worked there, not the fifteen hundred to twenty-four hundred once so freely predicted. Characteristically, they were mislabeled “the largest and most complete between Chicago and the Pacific Coast.” To put that claim into perspective, at about the same time 803 men worked at Topeka’s Santa Fe shops.²⁰

Two years later the nation entered a severe economic depression that lasted until the end of the decade. For several years shop employment probably was down significantly, something ignored by the press. In 1897, as the economy was recovering, for the first time in several years the Rock Island entered floats in Horton’s annual “birthday parade.” One featured an “immense eagle with outstretched pinions,” while a second contained a scale engine and passenger coach. Then came the floats of the car, cabinet, machine, boiler, tin, paint-upholstery, and blacksmith shops, each holding the foreman and several workers giving “specimens of their handiwork.” About six thousand onlookers watched this parade in what one editor called “emphatically a Rock Island town.”²¹

In 1898, for the first time in a decade, the newspapers reported new boxcars under construction. This workload

15. *Topeka Commonwealth*, reprinted in *Horton Headlight*, September 9, 16, 1887, November 16, 1888.

16. Grodinsky, *Transcontinental Railway Strategy*, 384; Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 128–30; *Official Guide of the Railways* (New York: National Railway Publication Co., June 1893), 445–50. Plans for this new Colorado route had begun in 1887. In May 1893 the Chicago–Colorado distance was thirty-eight miles shorter than the route via Horton. Mileages and times calculated from the *Official Guide of the Railways*, June 1893.

17. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 125–26; Kansas Town and Land Company Collection. The sale of the CK&N to the Rock Island occurred in Topeka.

18. *Horton Commercial*, January 30, 1890; *Horton Headlight*, October 31, 1889, July 30, 1890. Several short-lived rivals to these two newspapers also were published.

19. *Horton Commercial*, January 30, 1890; *Horton Headlight*, October 24, 1901.

20. *Horton Headlight*, February 19, 1891; *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 29, 1897. In 1897, despite poor economic times, the Topeka shops employed 1,379 workers.

21. *Horton Headlight*, September 23, 1897.

In February 1902 disaster struck when a fire destroyed two large shop buildings and caused two fatalities.

It started in the sawmill (right), spread to the adjacent freight car shop, and then to the lumberyard.



was credited to Assistant Superintendent J. W. Fitzgibbon, who tried to keep his men busy by lobbying management for work. His current goal was to have all Rock Island car work assigned to Horton, as previously most had gone to outside contractors. Two months later work started on one hundred more boxcars. When Fitzgibbon then received an order for fifty double-decked stock cars, he was called “the best friend Horton ever had in the shops.” Unfortunately for the city, he left in 1899 to work for another railroad.²²

The first decade of the new century saw many changes for the Rock Island. In December 1900 the board of directors approved extending the southwest line from Liberal toward El Paso, Texas. This was applauded in Horton, for it could mean additional work in the shops and more train employees. Although few long-distance passenger trains now went via Horton, most freight traffic to and from the southwest and Texas used this route. As local editors pointed out at every opportunity, the Horton line avoided allegedly high trackage rights charges via Kansas City. In 1902 the line southwest, forming an important route to California in connection with two other railroads, was completed. Anticipating long fruit trains from that state, Horton received a large icehouse for replenishing refrigerator cars. However, when the company started a first-class passenger train, the *Golden State Limited*, from Chicago to Los Angeles, it went via Kansas City, not Horton.²³

In February 1902 disaster struck when a fire destroyed two large shop buildings and caused two fatalities. It started in the sawmill, spread to the adjacent freight car shop, and then to the lumberyard, where several million board

feet of wood were stored. Many citizens rushed to help. “Almost the entire town’s male population . . . was put to work moving lumber,” but over half a million board feet burned and about \$250,000 in property was lost.²⁴

After the fire, rumors spread that the shops would leave Horton. Among the reasons cited were that (as of recently) the town was no longer on a passenger main line and occasionally it had water supply problems. Such talk, said an editor sarcastically, began fifteen minutes after the fire started. To local relief, reconstruction soon began, but freight car construction ceased as the car shop was replaced by a coach paint shop.²⁵

That same year the Rock Island opened a new locomotive shops complex, by far its largest, at Silvis, Illinois. Favorably located on the main line 189 miles west of Chicago, Silvis was a potential threat to Horton. Although the opening of this facility must have been common knowledge in Horton, it was not mentioned in local newspapers.²⁶

In 1907 the Rock Island constructed a freight car repair shop at Armourdale (Kansas City, Kansas). Initially employing three to four hundred men, it was built in conjunction with the opening of a five-thousand-car yard there. This large facility was necessary because the railroad was starting to shift much through-freight traffic to the higher quality, in grades and capacity, route via Kansas City rather than via Horton. Kansas City’s excellent connections to other railroads and to the Rock Island’s newly acquired Kansas City–St. Louis route also help explain this change.²⁷

22. Ibid., July 14, September 1, October 27, 1898, June 1, 1899.

23. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 151, 164; *Horton Headlight*, April 10, 1902, January 15, 1903. The Rock Island handled the *Golden State Limited* as far as Tucumcari, New Mexico. As the Kansas City route was superior to the one via Horton, those trackage rights charges probably were fully worth their cost.

24. *Horton Headlight*, February 13, 1902.

25. Ibid., February 13, 27, 1902.

26. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 183.

27. *Horton Headlight*, February 7, 1907, March 19, 1908; December 1, 1910. In the February 10, 1910, issue the editor reported that as many as



Interior view of Horton's locomotive shop in 1913. Although work was still thriving at Horton, the town was being threatened as larger shops opened at other locations, especially Silvis, Illinois.

The diversion of most through-freight to Kansas City was gradual, lasting well into the following decade. Thus, in April 1913 two of the seven freight crews that operated via Horton were transferred to Kansas City, and the recently merged *Headlight-Commercial* admitted that much of the Rock Island's freight business now went via the Missouri metropolis. More insights are provided by a consultant's report of 1915, in which he advocated that freight should go via Kansas City whenever possible. His data showed that, to a large extent, this was already true. For the year ending June 30, 1915, the Kansas City route handled about twice as much freight as the line through Horton. The former main line southwest via Horton gradually was turning into a branch line.²⁸

In October 1907, in a notice about a work-related injury, the *Headlight* first revealed that Mexicans were working in the shops. Five months later it said that, because of a shortage of unskilled labor, the previous summer the Rock Island had brought about sixty Mexicans to Horton. They were housed separately, in railroad-provided bunk cars (converted boxcars), at the edge of the yards south of the city limits. The general opinion, remarked the editor,

twenty freight trains a night passed through town. According to the September 1, 1947, *Headlight*, even at their maximum size, Horton's yards could hold fewer than eight hundred freight cars.

28. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 186; Horton *Headlight-Commercial*, April 24, 1913; J. W. Kendrick, *Report, Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railway* (Chicago: Receivers of the CRI&P Railway, 1915). In 1914 Horton's second weekly, the *Horton News*, suspended operations, as the editor said the town was not big enough for two newspapers. See *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, April 16, 1914.

was that Mexicans who came this far north were poor workers who also hoarded money to take back to Mexico. According to a supervisor, this was not true of his gang of (in the language of the times) twelve "little brown men." Instead, they liked to "eat and dress well and believe in spending." He called them "active little fellows [who were] willing to work"; one was

even described as having the makings of a fine American citizen. Most were single men, but two had brought their families. These references mark the beginnings of a Horton Mexican community that lasted about three decades.²⁹

In May 1915 the city assessor recorded Horton's population at 3,849. Of that total he classified 230 as African American, a number that included fifty Mexican workers and their families. Since his forms only had listings for whites and blacks, the assessor had included the Mexicans with the African Americans.³⁰

In 1916 the railroad began to build housing for its Mexican workers in "Little Mexico," on company property next to the shops. The homes came in sets of three, with two converted boxcars on the outside and a larger apartment constructed between them. The boxcars rented for five dollars a month, while the larger units cost ten dollars. These triple homes were themselves arranged in a square pattern, with a covered platform in the center for community events.³¹

29. *History of Horton and Surrounding Neighborhoods*, 152–56; *Horton Headlight*, October 17, 1907, March 19, 1908. Many of the men came from the state of Chihuahua. The general topic of Hispanics in Kansas is addressed in James N. Leiker, "Race Relations in the Sunflower State," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Autumn 2002), 214–36, esp. 228–31, 234–35.

30. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, May 6, 1915. At this time about eight hundred Horton residents worked for the Rock Island. No evidence has been found to indicate that African Americans ever worked in the shops.

31. *History of Horton and Surrounding Neighborhoods*, 152–56. This book includes plans for the triple homes and a map of a portion of the community. For a while one boxcar home was also used as a Spanish-language school until the teacher moved to Topeka. From this it can be inferred that the Mexican children did not attend Horton's public schools.

Among the blacksmith shop employees in 1912 is one of the Mexican workers (first row, far right), who began to be employed by the Rock Island at the Horton shops around 1907.



Occasionally, Horton's newspaper reported on the social life of its Mexican residents. In September 1921 they celebrated the home country's independence, inviting the whole community to the event. On the first day festivities featured a Mexican orchestra from Kansas City and a dance. The following day the Mexican Consul from Kansas City joined the celebrations. In 1922 the "Mexican colony" held a supper at the Knights of Columbus Hall, with about one hundred visitors there to sample Mexican dishes. The *Headlight* estimated that Little Mexico now had two hundred residents.³²

In 1922–1923 Horton was badly frayed by a national railroad strike. On July 1, 1922, 546 local workers from the six federated shop crafts—the machinists, boilermakers, carmen, sheet metal workers, blacksmiths, and electricians—walked off their jobs. Among other things, they protested the "farming out" of work, the Railroad Labor Board's recent approval of a wage reduction of seven cents per hour, and the end of overtime on Sundays and holidays. Nationally, almost four hundred thousand shop craft employees left their jobs. The railroads said they were in financial trouble and needed the changes.³³

Most people thought that the Rock Island would not try to reopen the shops unless the strike lasted many weeks, but the company soon advertised job openings for skilled workers. Civic leaders called a general meeting where the mayor and the presidents of the Horton Chamber of Commerce and the Kiwanis Club, among others, discussed the strike. "It was the unanimous feeling," reported one editor, "that the strikers have the moral support of the entire town." That quotation buttresses the findings of historians, who have concluded that the degree of support for

railroad strikes was positively correlated with the percentage of the community work force employed by the industry. That is, such support was generally strongest in specialized small towns where railroad employment dominated the economic base, and far weaker in the more economically diverse larger cities.³⁴

On August 16, after the company decided to reopen the shops with replacement workers, Governor Henry J. Allen placed Horton under martial law, with fifty national guard cavalymen from Clay Center stationed there. Although the town had seen no violence, tensions were high. A part of the coach shop became the sleeping "camp" and a dining area for new hires to protect them from certain harassment if they left the property.³⁵

In September the *Headlight-Commercial* printed a letter from Rock Island president James E. Gorman. It signified an attempt to form a company union, the only one (according to Gorman) with which the firm henceforth would negotiate. He stated that the seniority list for the new union would start with those working on July 10. Former employees acceptable to management would receive priority in hiring, but they would lose their old seniority. This letter made it clear that the Rock Island intended to crush the union.³⁶

32. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, September 15, 1921, June 22, 1922.

33. Colin J. Davis, *Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 13, 60, 63; Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 204; *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, April 10, 1924. Data in *Power at Odds*, 13, indicate that, with about six hundred workers, the Horton facilities were almost twice as large as the average Kansas railroad shop. At the time the state had thirty shops, with an average of 323 employees.

34. Davis, *Power at Odds*, 76; *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, July 20, August 10, 1922. For information showing the same correlation for an earlier period, see Herbert G. Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads in 1873–1874: Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?" in Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-class and Social History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 295–320.

35. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, August 31, December 7, 28, 1922, January 18, 1923. Horton was one of five Kansas towns where troops were stationed. On the latter, see Davis, *Power at Odds*, 87, 148.

36. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, September 21, 1922. In September an explosion occurred about thirty feet inside the shop fence. A cavalryman saw someone running away after the explosion and fired on him but missed. The device, called either a large firecracker or a "low-power bomb," had been thrown over the fence. The perpetrator never was found.

After fourteen weeks without comment, on October 12 the articulate editor of the *Headlight-Commercial*, Charles H. Browne, assessed the situation. Based on his observations in several towns, he thought the strike was lost and advised all to return to work. Already about four hundred men worked in the Horton shops. Two months later he wrote: "The striking shopmen have shown unusual courage and fortitude in standing firm for over five months. A lot of them have used up their savings, have cashed their [World War I] Liberty bonds and in some cases even sold their homes to continue the struggle." He thought the unions had fought a good, but losing, battle.³⁷

The strike still had some surprises for Horton. On December 18, after the camp for new workers had closed, a fight broke out between strikers and workers when the latter returned home in the afternoon. Tensions had been rising since the governor had pulled the national guard out earlier that month. Now local lawmen were in charge, and they had difficulty controlling the situation. Rumors, such as the strikers were planning to drive the workers out of town, circulated on both sides.³⁸

On December 19 strikers lining Eighth Street yelled at workers leaving for lunch, and the workers returned in kind. One worker pulled a gun and promptly was arrested and fined. The sheriff and four deputies came from the county seat at Hiawatha to help control the situation. Late that afternoon strikers again lined Eighth Street to make the workers "run the gauntlet." Soon a scuffle broke out and workers were pelted with bolts and bottles. As the lawmen tried to arrest two men for assault with intent to kill, a riot seemed imminent, but fortunately things did not go that far. That night fifteen officers patrolled the streets.³⁹

Local officials requested the return of troops, but the governor refused. All lawmen on the ground, including several Rock Island special agents, then decided on a zero tolerance policy toward strikers who gathered on the streets at noon or five o'clock, when workers left the shops. The latter were told they would have "ample protection" and that under no circumstances could they carry weapons. When authorities placed a simple notice about this policy in the newspaper—"No foolishness will be tolerated from any quarter"—peace returned. Calling these incidents a "two-day spasm," the *Headlight-Commercial* said Horton had received enough publicity of the kind no place wants.⁴⁰

In February 1923 two strike-related cases were tried in Hiawatha. One man was acquitted while another received a one-year jail sentence. Charges against sixteen of the forty-nine other defendants were dropped, and the remaining cases were postponed indefinitely. A public attorney stated that one conviction was enough to prevent any further troubles, and indeed, no related subsequent cases were reported in the press.⁴¹

Later in 1923 the Rock Island and the unions reached an agreement. Although it represented a major defeat for the unions, it did recognize seniority rights. It also gave former strikers sixty days in which to apply for employment.⁴²

The consequences of the strike for Horton, as a community, were disastrous. As editor Browne put it, "[h]omes have been sacrificed, savings lost, civic, fraternal and church organizations disrupted, business has suffered greatly, and bitter feeling has developed that only time and tact can eradicate. Horton is a new community in more ways than one. It has been a strenuous, disagreeable 12 months." Suffering a devastating defeat nationally, the unions officially called off the strike on March 28, 1924.⁴³

The following year the Rock Island selected the shops to rebuild three gasoline-powered "motors," or self-propelled passenger cars. Such equipment was replacing some steam-powered passenger trains on branch lines, at great savings to the railroads. Horton modified the motors from a direct drive system to a more successful one where a 275-horsepower engine generated electricity to power traction motors. A representative of the Electro-Motive Corporation of Cleveland, a leader in the field, was in Horton to supervise the work.⁴⁴

In 1926 the shops were designated the "Electric Motor Car Headquarters" for the system, and in 1926–1927 they converted two steel mail cars into internal combustion locomotives, each powered by two 275-horsepower petroleum distillate engines. Upon completion, one was displayed in several major cities. Shortly both locomotives were put into branch line passenger and freight service, where they performed well for many years. In 1929 the Horton shops built three more gas-electric locomotives, whose 800-horse-

37. Ibid., October 12, 19, December 7, 1922.

38. Ibid., December 21, 1922.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., February 8, 15, 1923.

42. Davis, *Power at Odds*, 156.

43. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, July 5, 1923; April 3, 10, 1924. Many strikers left the state, particularly for California, where anecdotal evidence suggests that a small Horton colony existed for a time.

44. Ibid., June 26, 1925; Edmund Keilty, *Doodlebug Country: The Rail Motorcar on the Class 1 Railroads of the United States* (Glendale, Calif.: Interurban Press, 1982), 61.

In 1926–1927 the Horton shops converted two steel mail cars into internal combustion locomotives. Pictured here is the first such locomotive built in Horton just after its construction in 1926.



power units were successful enough to be used for more than three decades.⁴⁵

In addition to their economic benefits, the shops also contributed to the town's social life. In the 1920s they fielded baseball and basketball teams and formed a Rock Island band. In 1927 an unused area on the shops grounds was converted into a playing field with a grandstand, and in May almost five hundred spectators turned out for the grand-opening baseball game against Sabetha. A separate team, the Mexican Nine, played Mexican teams and some non-Hispanic teams from other cities; it had its own field, "Tweentracks," west of town.⁴⁶

In 1929 activity was at an all-time high, and the yards were congested with locomotives, coaches, and freight cars awaiting work. When the Rock Island announced a wage increase in March, it made headlines, for it added forty-five hundred dollars per month to community income. Noted a local editor, "Horton is certainly getting the breaks these days." These breaks included new J.C. Penney and Montgomery Ward department stores and an A&P grocery store. That October, however, Wall Street saw developments whose impacts few could have imagined.⁴⁷

When the stock market crashed, editor Browne thought so little of it that it did not make his newspaper's front page. After all, Wall Street was far from Holton in both distance and culture, and the shenanigans of the "eastern money men" were unlikely to have a significant impact on small-town Kansas. Like most Americans, he also thought that any economic downturn would be short lived.⁴⁸

45. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, December 17, 1926, May 4, 29, September 4, 1928; Keilty, *Doodlebug Country*, 61. For a more detailed treatment, see "Rock Island Adds to Its Power Rail Car Equipment," *Railway Age* 82 (April 30, 1927), 1333–36.

46. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, August 17, 1926; April 12, 22, May 17, 1927. The Mexican community held another fiesta to celebrate Independence Day in September 1926. See *ibid.*, September 17, 1926.

47. *Ibid.*, March 12, 15, 19, October 8, 26, 1929. The shops were repairing eight engines and eleven coaches per month.

48. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1930.

At the onset of the Great Depression the Rock Island employed 756 in Horton, of which about 600 (80 percent) worked at the shops. Of Horton's four thousand residents, about 65 percent were directly dependent on railroad wages, which generated about one hundred thousand dollars per month. This monetary figure can be used as a benchmark for measuring the looming economic collapse.⁴⁹

Early 1930 witnessed the first signs of trouble. In February most shop departments started to work only five days per week. In March four hundred workers were laid off following a large decrease in carloadings during January and February. Ten days later the locomotive department closed entirely, and the coach repair shop soon followed. Management ordered the shops fully reopened in April, but cancelled that order when the expected traffic upturn failed to materialize. All departments were back at work on May 1, some with only a small force.⁵⁰

The coming of hard times contributed to some hostility toward the shops' Mexicans. The "Mexican situation" was a matter of concern because, during the virtual shut-down, many had continued to work while non-Hispanics were laid off. Perhaps this was because they were paid less than non-Hispanic employees doing comparable work. At a public meeting called to discuss the situation, all agreed

49. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1930, December 5, 1932. Almost everyone else in town was indirectly dependent on the Rock Island payroll.

50. *Ibid.*, January 31, March 25, April 22, 25, 29, May 2, 1930.



In addition to their economic benefits, the shops also contributed to Horton's social life by creating baseball and basketball teams and a Rock Island band. A separate team, the Mexican Nine, played Mexican teams and some non-Hispanic teams from other cities and had its own field, "Tween-tracks" (left), west of town.

that those who refused to become naturalized citizens "should be shown little consideration in the matter of employment." This meant most Mexicans, for, among other reasons, their Kansas City consulate urged them to retain their citizenship. Most individuals present at the meeting agreed that many Mexicans would make excellent citizens but also confirmed that those uninterested in citizenship should be laid off. A representative was sent to the railroad to request that "unnaturalized Mexicans" be refused work. The outcome was not reported in the press, but almost all Mexicans eventually lost their jobs and moved away. Still, their experiences were similar to those of most non-Hispanics, although they may have lost their jobs sooner. Some returned to Mexico, but many found work in other Rock Island towns.⁵¹

By May and June the situation looked up a bit, as some men were recalled to the coach shop. But on July 15 the shops closed, a move blamed on the "industrial depression in the East," which had produced a nationwide downturn. Browne optimistically reported that "railroad towns have their ups and downs" and things soon would return to normal. He noted that closure, as the term was used, excluded emergency work. Based on later evidence, during the first half of the depression 40 to 125 men worked in the shops, even when they were "closed."⁵²

51. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1930. According to the *History of Horton and Surrounding Neighborhoods*, 152–56, at the start of the Great Depression the shops employed 127 Mexicans. This number would be about one-fourth of the work force and seems too high. More likely, 127 people resided in Horton's Mexican community. In the 1970s a few Mexicans once employed in the shops still lived in Horton, and others held annual Horton reunions in Silvis, Illinois.

52. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, June 3, 16, July 15, 1930, January 10, June 13, August 15, 1935. The June 16 article reported that the locomotive department would close, but later news made it clear that all shops were shut down, except for emergency work.

what October would bring. Most people, said Browne, thought that the worst of the downturn was over and that circumstances gradually would improve. Perhaps it was good that Horton could not know how much worse the situation would become.⁵³

By October conditions were so bad that the Rock Island organized help for its laid-off workers. Already it was obvious that some needed support just to survive the winter. The money came from voluntary contributions by men still with jobs and was used to buy certain basics, such as coal, sugar, and flour. Horton received one of the system's four "district commissary stores" that distributed these items.⁵⁴

In February 1931 Browne called the outlook much brighter. On March 1 the shops were to reopen for two weeks, five days per week. Indications were, he said, that the railroads and other businesses were improving steadily and that soon "working conditions will be back to normal again." The shops also worked ten days in April.⁵⁵

That July a *Headlight-Commercial* headline read, "500 Men to Work at Shops Next Two Weeks," and almost all those still on the seniority list were recalled to work two five-day weeks. Men were needed because the company was converting all 231 coal-fired steam engines operating south and west of Kansas City to oil burners. Starting October 19, 550 men were on the job, including about 225 in the locomotive department, and the work continued until the end of the year. At about the same time, some Horton men were called to Armourdale and Herington to work on conversions. Such transfers would become increasingly

53. *Ibid.*, September 9, 1930.

54. *Ibid.*, October 27, 1930. As a further gesture, the firm made company doctors available without charge.

55. *Ibid.*, February 26, March 2, 1931.

The year 1933 generally is regarded as the low point of the Great Depression. Horton, however, experienced an increased workload as some of Rock Island's largest engines (right) were brought to its shops for repair.



common, causing much heartache for the community.⁵⁶

The following year was terrible for Horton. Except for emergency work, the shops were open for, at most, forty-two days in 1932. This figure assumes ten days in January, for which no information is available. More likely, regular work days numbered only thirty-two that dark year.⁵⁷

The year 1933 generally is regarded as the low point of the Great Depression, but for Horton it was not as bad as the previous year. Although some newspaper accounts are vague, apparently in both January and February those recalled worked ten days. The March force worked eight days, but only four days were paid in April. The June callback was cancelled when the firm entered bankruptcy.⁵⁸

Bolstering employment, an engine of the 5000 class, the Rock Island's largest, was assigned to the shops for repairs in mid-year. Some managers thought, correctly, that the engine would be difficult to handle in Horton, which was designed for smaller locomotives (many of which were stored during the depression). Further, moving the engine over the relatively light rails between Topeka and Horton proved hazardous and slow. The shops' difficulties in handling such modern engines did not bode well for their future.⁵⁹

That June the *Headlight-Commercial* announced what it called the best news for Horton since 1929. Starting July 5 the shops would work five-day weeks, "possibly permanently." Such optimism stemmed from the railroad's "limited receivership," which made more funds available for maintenance. The nineteen days worked that month were almost twice as many as for any month since March 1930. The relatively good times continued into September, but then the pace slackened again.⁶⁰

Horton workers were now regularly reassigned to other cities. In reaction, the railroad committee of the Horton Chamber of Commerce appealed to management for more local work. At one time three hundred men had repaired freight cars and coaches there, but since 1930 that number had steadily declined so that few workers remained. An important, but unstated, part of the problem was that Chicago, El Reno (Oklahoma), and Armourdale could repair the newer steel freight cars while Horton could only handle the dwindling number of wooden cars.

dum prepared for Governor Payne Ratner, eventually five 5000-class engines received light repairs in Horton. See Charles H. Browne, "Many Kinds of Work Done at Horton Shops [1939]," Governor's Records. A survey of the Rock Island's locomotive repair facilities for this period illustrates a part of the problem. Only the Silvis shops were capable of handling all locomotives on the system. They had a ninety-foot turntable while Horton had only a seventy-five-foot model. Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with a ninety-foot turntable, also could handle larger engines than could Horton. See also Lloyd E. Stagner, *Rock Island Motive Power, 1933-1955* (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Publishing Co., 1980), 129.

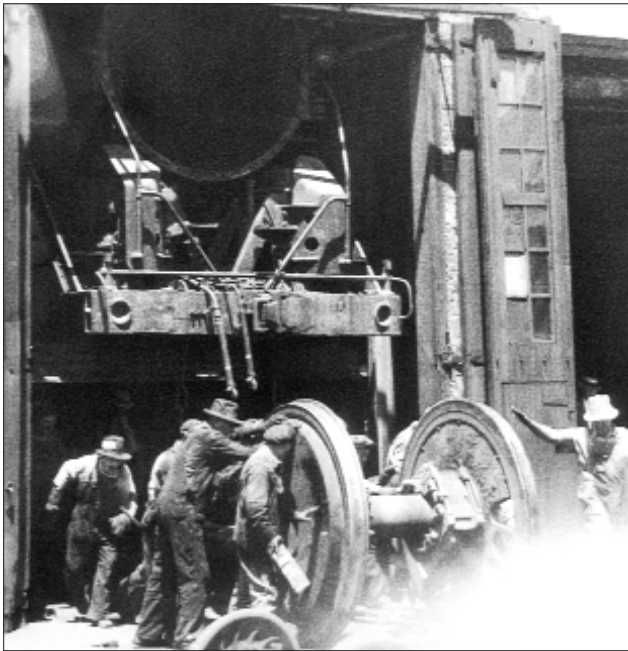
60. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, June 26, July 3, 27, 1933; *Horton Headlight*, August 31, 1933. In only nineteen of the thirty-nine months since March 1930 had Horton men worked as many as ten days. The *Horton Headlight-Commercial* changed its name back to the *Horton Headlight* in August 1933.

56. *Ibid.*, September 9, 16, 23, 28, October 15, 23, 1931. Those who had not worked for more than a year were dropped from the seniority lists.

57. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 219; *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, March, 7, 28, 31, April 28, November 7, December 5, 1932. In April the Citizens State Bank of Horton closed its doors. At this time the railroad received a ten-million-dollar loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In mid-year almost all Rock Island workers took a 10 percent pay cut.

58. Hayes, *Iron Road to Empire*, 221; *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, January 26, 30, March 6, May 29, June 8, 1933. In February 121 men were at work, and 173 in March, but only a few in April and May.

59. *Horton Headlight-Commercial*, June 15, August 10, 1933. F. Wesly Krambeck, William D. Edson, and Jack W. Farrell, *Rock Island Steam Power* (Bethesda, Md.: Edson Publications, 2002), 125. According to a memoran-



This large 5000-class engine is having its driving wheels removed at the Horton shops in 1933. However, it became evident that these facilities were poorly suited to handle the large engines, and locomotive repair work steadily declined.

The chamber also complained that, for some months, Shawnee, Oklahoma, had secured all work on motors.⁶¹

When locomotive work also declined, the chamber requested a meeting with Vice President of Operations Louis C. Fritch. He recommended that Horton's locomotive department continue to handle class six repairs. Perhaps this sounded promising to the uninformed, but class six were the lightest kind of repairs and represented a substantial downgrading from when Horton handled all classes. The wheel shop, which supplied a large part of the system, would also continue, but Fritch saw little prospect for work on freight cars, coaches, or motors.⁶²

By now the town suspected that the shops were slowly being "dried up." Since closure would be disastrous, in March 1935 citizens began a campaign to save jobs. In particular, they tried unsuccessfully to reverse plans to downgrade the regional storehouse, located within the shops complex, to only a local role. For years it had sixty to seventy employees, but on June 1 the work force was to be reduced to seven. Seeking help wherever possible, the president of a union local wrote President Roosevelt, demanding an immediate investigation of the layoffs. This was justified, he believed, because Rock Island had explained to employees that only through layoffs could the railroad meet payments due on its federal loan.⁶³

61. *Horton Headlight*, January 7, March 5, 12, 29, May 24, 1934. On March 15 a headline read, "First Horton Mexican Eligible to Vote Here." Juan Hernandez, a machinist's helper who had lived in Horton for about twenty years, had just become the first to be naturalized.

62. *Ibid.*, February 7, 1935.

63. *Ibid.*, March 28, 1935.

That June 170 men, all in the locomotive department, worked just ten days. Still, it was the first ten-day period of work since February. This low level of activity continued so that on October 1 the shops had worked but forty-eight days the entire year. The year 1935 turned out almost as bad as 1932, with only sixty-eight days of non-emergency work.⁶⁴

Late that year the *Headlight* again objected to the relocation of men to other cities. Recently sixty workers, mostly freight-car men, had been called to Armourdale. A chamber of commerce committee traveled to Chicago to confer with company president James E. Gorman, arguing that Horton could do the job as cheaply as other shops and that the men were entitled to work at home. Applying what pressure the city could muster, Kansas political leaders, U.S. Senator Arthur Capper and U.S. Representative W. P. Lambertson, also attended this October 26 meeting, and Governor Alfred M. Landon sent a supporting letter.⁶⁵

The committee achieved some success, as management announced that the shops would be open ten days in November and December and that some freight cars would be repaired. At that meeting Fritch revealed that for several years some officials had urged closing the shops during the depression but that he had preferred to keep the locomotive and wheel departments open.⁶⁶

The following March and April two hundred men worked ten days each month, and by June employment was even higher. Of this hopeful sign, the conservative *Headlight* said:

A force of 300 men working 20 days a month throughout this summer and fall . . . would do more to stabilize conditions in [Horton] than half a dozen government work projects—no matter what their size.

Railroad workmen here need employment to pay back taxes, to repair and repaint their homes, to buy needed clothing and furniture—in fact, to again start living like normal human beings.

After many difficult years most workers were "desperately trying to hang on to residence properties here." The editor

64. *Ibid.*, June 3, August 15, September 2, 1935.

65. *Ibid.*, October 28, 1935.

66. *Ibid.*

At one time three hundred men had repaired freight cars and coaches in the Horton shops, but during the 1930s that number continually decreased until few workers remained. Part of the problem was that Chicago, El Reno (Oklahoma), and Armourdale could repair the newer steel freight cars while Horton could only handle the dwindling number of wooden cars (right).



hoped the company would employ more men locally rather than transferring them elsewhere.⁶⁷

In July 1936 the railroad's new chief operating officer, John D. Farrington, inspected the shops. Thereafter he designated them a "manufacturing point" (for making special parts) for the system, and all repairs of motors returned to Horton. The following April editor Browne reported that for the past six months the force had stabilized at two hundred men working five days per week.⁶⁸

Then disaster struck. After about fifty years of such work, locomotive maintenance ended unannounced either late in 1937 or early in 1938. The company made this change as quietly as possible. This "stealth" approach worked, for apparently Browne and Horton did not notice the decreasing workload until it was too late. Now the shops had only thirty-eight employees.⁶⁹

By July 1938 the situation was labeled a crisis. In a front-page article Browne asked, "Must We Stand By and See Horton's Only Industry Wrecked?" Although he did not explain his reasoning, the editor correctly saw the implications of a recent visit by railroad officials:

While no public statement was made, and while they might deny it individually or collectively, the officials came to Horton to find what they could tear down and destroy. It appears the time has come when the million dollar Horton shops are to be wrecked, razed and abandoned—maybe not all at once, but a piece at a time.

Now somebody, and no one in Horton could find out who, had decided to close the shops. The town and shops, said Browne, were "marked for slaughter."⁷⁰

The editor was outraged. In the name of economy, he said, "one of the biggest industrial plants in Kansas is to be destroyed." How ironic, he thought, that a railroad needed state permission to take off passenger trains, yet it could close a whole complex "and cause untold economic loss without any need for authorization." The feeling of disaster was reinforced when, in 1938, the assessor found only 3,381 inhabitants in Horton, 318 fewer than one year earlier.⁷¹

One bright note came in September, when Horton was assigned its first conversion of a motor to diesel power. However, machinery was moving out steadily. Boiler shop equipment and an angle cock grinding machine left for Silvis, while a punch and shears went to Shawnee. Then all machines in the wheel shop were transferred to Armourdale, which became the Rock Island's "wheel center." The latest rumor was that Horton would handle nothing but motor repairs.⁷²

By June 1939 the work force was down to thirty. The chamber of commerce continued to pressure Farrington, who would only say that Horton would handle motor repairs. He was ordering this work, he added, although costs were higher than at other shops. As to machinery moving out, he asked the citizens to appreciate the advantages of concentrating one type of work at a single shop. Browne was not appeased, complaining that Farrington was ignoring "the humanitarian angle." "Economy is the watchword," he said, "no matter what the cost!"⁷³

At this point Browne asked Kansas governor Payne H. Ratner to intervene. When he agreed, the *Headlight* announced that Horton had found a friend just when it need-

67. Ibid., March 9, April 6, 1936.

68. Ibid., July 13, 23, 1936, April 5, 1937.

69. Ibid., March 21, 1938.

70. Ibid., July 14, 1938.

71. Ibid., July 14, 18, 21, 1938.

72. Ibid., September 15, 1938, May 25, 1939; Keilty, *Doodlebug Country*, 62.

73. *Horton Headlight*, June 12, 1939.



During 1938–1939 Horton’s repair machinery, including this one-hundred-ton wheel lathe, was moved to other shops across the country, foreshadowing the abandonment of the Horton shops.

ed one most. The governor sent a telegram to Farrington expressing his great concern about job reductions and suggesting the shops become the “general manufacturing plant” for the system, employing about two hundred. He also urged a conference with railroad officials. In his reply, Farrington noted that because of Horton’s location off the main lines it could “not be used economically for locomotive work or coach repair.”⁷⁴

On July 6 Farrington met in Topeka with Ratner, other state officials, and a Horton delegation. Browne presented the case for his city, stressing its central location within the corporate network. The governor asserted that Kansas found no reason to close such a valuable facility. The state contributed a great deal of traffic to the Rock Island, and Ratner believed the company owed Kansas something in return. Farrington’s only commitment was that several more motors would be overhauled in Horton.⁷⁵

Again Kansas political leaders offered assistance. When Senator Capper learned of the Rock Island’s outstanding loan from the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation, he asked its chairman to investigate the loan and asserted that abandonment was not “justified in any reasonable sense.” Senator Clyde M. Reed, a member of the Interstate Commerce Committee, appealed personally to another Rock Island officer, who confirmed that the company had no plans to completely abandon the shops. With

such men behind it, said Browne, Horton was “breathing a sigh of relief.” Nevertheless, the railroad did not increase the amount of work assigned to the shops.⁷⁶

As American involvement in the European war increased, many saw a bright future for the complex in

defense work. Browne asked Senator Capper to use his influence in that direction, saying that the buildings were easily convertible to producing small arms, ammunition, or even airplanes. After many years without work, he added, skilled Horton workers were begging the government “to grasp this opportunity to retain and use this Kansas industrial plant, and thus help bring back a measure of the prosperity that once was ours.”⁷⁷

In December 1940 the press reported that the government might use the facilities to produce machine tools. Since that required at least five hundred skilled workers, it was in line with local hopes. The following year several defense organizations, including the Mid-Central War Resources Board, toured the complex. The community also was determined to fight eastern manufacturers’ attempts to buy those machines still at the shops, calling that “lawful piracy.”⁷⁸

The maintenance and conversions of railroad motors continued, and Horton now repaired all company scales. However, machines continued to move out, many to Armourdale. In April 1941 the shops had twenty-four workers, whose total earnings were five thousand dollars per

74. *Ibid.*, June 15, 1939. Charles H. Browne to Payne H. Ratner, June 11, 1939, Governor’s Records; J. D. Farrington to Ratner, June 15, 1939, *ibid.*; Ratner to Farrington and E. M. Durham, June 22, 1939, *ibid.*; Ratner to Arthur Capper, July 9, 1939, *ibid.* Browne ended his letter asking for Ratner’s help by saying, “You have our future in your hands, Governor.”

75. *Horton Headlight*, July 7, 10, 1939.

76. *Ibid.*, August 3, 1939. Browne seems also to have taken the lead in soliciting the help of Reed and Capper. See Charles H. Browne to Clyde M. Reed, July 21, 1939, Governor’s Records; Browne to Arthur Capper, July 21, 1939, *ibid.*; Capper to Browne, July 25, 1939, *ibid.*

77. *Horton Headlight*, May 20, June 20, 1940.

78. *Ibid.*, December 9, 12, 16, 1940, January 2, February 13, 1941. Apparently some in the community assumed that the machines still at the shops would be useful for producing machine tools. In April 1942 assessors found Horton’s population to be 2,622, versus 2,743 one year earlier. See *ibid.*, April 13, 1942.

As employment continued to dwindle during the 1940s, the shop complex, photographed here, stands nearly empty. On July 20, 1946, after nearly sixty years, the shops closed permanently. Said the Horton Headlight, "Thus, the 'Horton Shops' have vanished into history, and with them the memories of the railroad boom town started in a corn field in 1886."



month. Even at this level, they generated more income than any other Horton business.⁷⁹

In September 1942 an alternate use for the shops was found when the Lakeview Storage Company leased five of the largest buildings for storing government food. The coach shop, coach paint shop, sawmill, locomotive shop, and storehouse became warehouses, where up to five hundred carloads of food for the military were stored prior to shipment overseas. Unfortunately for Horton, Lakeview usually employed only fifteen people.⁸⁰

Two months later the railroad began to raze some of its buildings. Contrary to local fears, none of the seven largest was destroyed. The biggest job was demolishing most of the roundhouse, reducing it from twenty-seven to three stalls. Other buildings to go were the boiler shop, tin shop, and powerhouse. Browne acknowledged that the railroad would save some taxes, "but the town and Kansas would lose."⁸¹

By this time Horton's economic base had changed drastically. On the positive side, it was more diversified, with many small companies. The largest employers included the Horton Garment Company, employing forty-five women; a hatchery; Lakeview Storage; an alfalfa dehydration plant; and the shops, with forty men. Lacking local opportunities, many families left permanently for high-paying jobs in war industries elsewhere. In August 1943 Horton's population was only twenty-five hundred, and many downtown stores stood vacant.⁸²

As the war ended, Lakeview relinquished its lease, and the complex's future remained in question. The community hoped that it would become Rock Island's major diesel maintenance facility, but Horton's poor location on what were now two little-used branch lines made this hope unrealistic. In June 1946 thirteen shopmen were laid off amid rumors that the buildings were about to be sold or leased. When the railroad announced that it was closing the facility, only six workers remained.⁸³

On July 20, 1946, after nearly sixty years, the shops closed permanently. Said the *Headlight* philosophically, "Thus, the 'Horton Shops' have vanished into history, and with them the memories of the railroad boom town started in a corn field in 1886 and christened by its promoters 'The Magic City.'" All remaining buildings were sold to Kramer Machine & Engineering, a steel-fabricating company. The *Headlight* called this a triumph for the city, as they would be used for "heavy production in manufacturing." Browne exclaimed "that the Kramer Company will be welcomed to Horton is putting it mildly!" However, Kramer's plans failed, and eventually it too sold the buildings.⁸⁴

79. Ibid., April 24, 1941.

80. Ibid., September 10, November 16, 1942, February 22, 1943.

81. Ibid., November 16, 1942. Originally, the roundhouse had twenty-eight stalls, but one was later converted to another use.

82. Ibid., February 22, August 9, 1943, October 9, 1944.

83. Ibid., December 13, 1945, June 6, 1946.

84. Ibid., July 4, 22, 1946, December 29, 1947. Scale work moved to Herington, and modifications of motors went to Armourdale.

In time both branch lines that served Horton were abandoned. The route northwest into Nebraska was pulled up in 1967, and the former main line between St. Joseph and Topeka lasted until 1983. With the latter change, the former railroad town became a town without a railroad. In 2004 Horton had fewer than two thousand residents.

Following the Kramer failure, Hammersmith Manufacturing & Sales bought two shop buildings and started fabricating steel in 1965. The company remains in business today, specializing in metal fabricating and machining, and employs thirty to forty people. Hammersmith occupies the former coach shop and had used the coach paint shop until it was destroyed by fire in 1995.⁸⁵

The locomotive shop, once a 112 x 200-foot structure, was partially destroyed by a tornado in 1948. The remaining half is used by Gaskell Machine & Metal, Inc., whose owner, Kirk Gaskell, appreciates the historic significance of the building. Like Hammersmith, Gaskell works in metal fabricating and machining and employs twelve to fifteen people.⁸⁶


Today Horton is mostly a residential community with relatively few local jobs. The average age of the population, approximately forty, is rather high. Although no survey exists, almost certainly more residents are supported by social security and other retirement plans than any other source of income. Among the largest local employers are the Northeast Kansas Center for Health and Wellness, with 125 workers, and the Unified School District, with about 140; other important employers are the City of Horton and a retirement home. Current basic employers (those that bring money into the community) include a few retailers, some small-scale manufacturers (such as Gaskell and Hammersmith), the Kansas Department of Transportation (forty-one employees), the Brown-Atchison Electric Cooperative Association, and two funeral homes.

Many residents travel outside of town for jobs. The largest recent sources for new employment are two casinos, located six and twelve miles from town, respectively. Others commute longer distances to such cities as St. Joseph, Leavenworth, Atchison and, especially, Topeka (forty-five

miles away). A few retired Rock Island workers still live in Horton, but it is unlikely that a single working railroader resides there today.⁸⁷

Some direct descendants of the Mexican men who worked in the shops yet live in Horton. A survey conducted in late 2004 found ten such individuals, including five children, four grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. In addition, one woman whose uncle had worked in the shops came to Horton in 1928 with her recently widowed mother, who moved there to be near her brother. Many of these descendants have other children and grandchildren now widely scattered across the nation.⁸⁸

Because of its strategic location at the junction of two main lines, Horton acquired the main shops of the Chicago, Kansas & Nebraska Railroad. Eventually they employed hundreds, and for a short time around 1900 they probably were the second largest shops complex within the Rock Island system. In 1902 much larger shops were built at Silvis, Illinois, but Horton remained an important facility until the Great Depression. Thereafter, its poor location on what had become minor branch lines and its inability to handle large steam engines and steel freight cars largely led to the decision to close the shops. Community resistance prevented complete closure in the 1930s, but the inevitable finally came in 1946.

Horton's experience was both typical of and different from the economic fate of relatively small railroad towns. It was typical in that railroad jobs disappeared, leading to economic turmoil for the community. For most towns, such job losses can be traced, especially, to railroading's increasing mechanization and to the shift of passenger and freight traffic to other modes. In Horton's case, the main problem was the town's increasingly peripheral location within the system, which explains why the facilities did not receive important improvements and why the shops, as the *Horton Headlight* acquiesced, "vanished into history." 

85. *History of Horton and Surrounding Neighborhoods*, 19; *Horton Headlight*, December 21, 1995; Van Norris, interview by author, March 7, 2003.

86. *Horton Headlight*, June 24, 1948; Shannon M. Scott and Kirk Gaskell, interview by author, February, 18, 2003.

87. Several Horton residents supplied information about the town's economy in early 2004, including City Administrator Mike Leighton and City Commissioner Ron Smith. Smith estimates that 25 percent of the current population lives on retirement incomes. Other basic data about Horton are available at www.city-data.com. The latter says that 27.2 percent of the working population is in educational, health, and social services, 21.0 percent in arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services, and 12.2 percent in public administration. The nearest railroad today is a Union Pacific main line, about five miles away.

88. Shannon M. Scott kindly provided the names and telephone numbers of several relatives of former shop workers. Information about the Mexican Americans still living in Horton came primarily from Greg Ramirez, Evelyn Ramirez, and Virginia Radford.